

March 8, 2000: "The U.S. State Department Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1999."

Testimony on the U.S State Department Country Reports on the Human Rights Practices for 1999

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International Operations and Human Rights Subcommittee

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for inviting me to testify at today's hearings on the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights. I am appearing today as the Director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom. I am also a member of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom -- an independent panel created by Congress in 1998 to review U.S. government policies regarding religious persecutors -- and will be commenting on the China, Russia and Sudan Country Reports today on behalf of the Commission, as well as Freedom House. These three countries are the primary focus of the Commission in its first year. My area of concentration will be religious freedom....

Now I turn to the reports on the three countries with respect to which I speak on behalf of the Commission, as well as Freedom House.

CHINA

With respect to the China report, a crucial point that the report fails to emphasize is that control of religion is manifestly a policy of the central authorities. Exercise of religion is tolerated only in so far as it serves the purposes of the state. Since the passage of State Council regulations in 1994 requiring registration of all religious groups, China has shown a determination to "manage" exercise of religion "according to law." In compliance with that policy, local authorities throughout the country have drafted restrictive regulations pertaining to the exercise of religion. While the degree of zeal with which the policy is implemented varies from province to province, the principle that religion must serve the state, inherent in the Chinese Communist Party's Marxist ideology, is promulgated through law and propaganda by the Communist Party.

So while it is true that religious repression is found in "some"

areas, and that Chinese officials resist control of religion by foreign entities, such as the Vatican, these facts do not explain the persecution of non-Catholic religious groups, including the indigenous Falun Gong, and Tibetan Buddhists, or Chinese-led Christian house churches and Muslim congregations. Nor do they fully convey the reality that all non-registered religious groups, even those that are tolerated, lack legal protection, function only at the sufferance of local authorities, and, now under the new anti-cult decree, risk criminal prosecution. When the overall religious situation is understood in this light, an obvious deduction can be made, as it has by the Vatican, that Bishop James Su is in government detention, and not that his whereabouts are simply "unclear" with his diocese saying one thing and the state saying another, as the report asserts.

That a distinct policy directive of the central government calls for the official "management" of religion is a fundamental fact about human rights in China and should be highlighted to provide an accurate understanding of the situation, and not mentioned only in passing as one among hundreds of other facts in the 67-page China report.

RUSSIA

Similarly, it bears emphasizing in the 77-page report on Russia that the largest pending issue there is the status of the significant number of religious organizations that were not able to re-register before the December 31, 1999 deadline (due in part to bureaucratic problems). Up to half of Russia's religious groups remain unregistered and, according to the 1997 law, are now subject to liquidation. This month, for the first time, to our knowledge, a local court, in Voronezh, has used the liquidation procedures to terminate a church and is now threatening to liquidate up to 13 other churches. Though this information became available only after the State Department report was published, many other religious organizations have been and continue to be in an insecure legal situation that probably will not be resolved until after the Presidential elections in late April. The registration problem is fundamental to understanding religious freedom in Russia for it points to the lack of legal and institutional security for religion in Russia.

In addition, conspicuous in its absence is any discussion of the clearest harbinger of future religious persecution: the government's use of anti-Muslim language in its propaganda campaign to stir up support for its conflict in Chechnya. These facts merit priority treatment and analysis in the report.

SUDAN

Essential facts are lost in the report on Sudan to such a degree that it possibly qualifies as the weakest of the reports. While the report mentions that 2 million people have died in the conflict, it fails to give a real sense of the scale and intensity of the government's prosecution of the war. At times the report is erratic and unclear -- even about the basic fact that religious persecution is at the core of the conflict. Tucked into the middle of a paragraph about press freedom is the critical finding: "In the context of the Islamization and Arabization drive, pressure -- including forced

Islamization -- on non-Muslims remained strong. Fears of Arabization and Islamization and the imposition of Shari'a fueled support for the civil war throughout the country."

In its resolution of June 15, 1999, the House of Representatives characterized the regime as "deliberately and systematically committing genocide." The Catholic bishops of East Africa made a similar assessment in their poignant plea to the international community last August. In fact, the death toll in Sudan is more than twice that of Rwanda's and greater than those of Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor combined. After reviewing detailed reports of the Sudanese government's deliberate policies of enslavement, rape, water-supply poisonings, undefended aerial bombings, torture, and the mass destruction of unarmed villages, churches and refugee camps, Nobel laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel wrote to President Clinton (in a letter reprinted in the current issue of *Sh'ma*, a Jewish intellectual journal) that "I am haunted by what I know of Sudan," also calling it a "genocide."

The government of Sudan's brutal conduct has triggered comprehensive U.S. trade and financial sanctions. These sanctions were extended last fall when the Administration designated the Khartoum regime as a "country of particular concern" due to its "egregious" religious persecution. These facts should have been given greater emphasis in the report on Sudan.

The report neglects to underscore the significance of the government's routine blocking of international, including American, food aid to the south Sudan and the Nuba mountains in what Senator Bill Frist calls "calculated starvation." This strategy has killed hundreds of thousands of Sudanese civilians, unquestionably the most lethal weapon of war in this conflict.

The report also fails to make the critical connection between new oil development by Khartoum and the unfolding human rights tragedy. Recent assessments by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Sudan, and the Canadian government have all found an inextricable link between the actions of the Khartoum regime and the Greater Nile project.

Since the oil pipeline revenues began flowing several months ago, the Khartoum regime has escalated its ruthless assaults on the southern civilian populations. Targeted with particular savagery are those areas immediately surrounding the pipeline itself where, as the report finds, the Sudanese military is now carrying out scorched-earth devastation. At February 15 hearings on Sudan before the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, Smith College scholar Eric Reeves attested: "The scorched-earth warfare of the Government of Sudan and its local military allies has the clear goal of creating a 'sanitized' security corridor for the Greater Nile project in all its forms: the

pipeline, the rigs in the oil fields, the attendant infrastructure, and the concessions where future development and extraction will take place."

The international press, as well as a recent report commissioned by the Canadian government, have reported that the resources of the Greater Nile partners, including roads, airstrips and aircraft, are being used directly for military purposes. Helicopter gunships and Antonov bombers, key elements of the Khartoum regime's war on civilians, had access to the extraordinarily well-positioned airstrip of the partners. On March 1, the Khartoum regime bombed the Samaritan's Purse hospital, run by the family of the Rev. Billy Graham, in Lui near Juba in southern Sudan, where four American doctors have treated over 100,000 patients since 1998; at least two patients were killed in the attack. A few weeks before, the government had deliberately bombed a Catholic primary school in the Nuba mountains, killing 14 children. Answering press questions about the incident, a government spokesman remarked that "the bombs landed where they were supposed to land."

In addition to facilitating the Khartoum regime's war effort through direct enrichment and resources, as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright made clear several months ago, it is the prospect of new, unimpeded oil revenues that convinces the otherwise-bankrupt Khartoum regime that it can acquire the military means to win the civil war outright. A war that the Congress has declared to be "genocidal" will continue unless oil development and revenues are removed as the means for the regime to insulate itself economically. This was precisely Secretary Albright's point in Nairobi when she criticized the involvement of Talisman Energy, a 25% partner in the Greater Nile oil project. The Sudanese government's oil joint venture, the Greater Nile Petroleum Operating Company (GNPOC), was itself specially designated as a sanctioned entity by the U.S. Treasury Department on Feb. 16.

Similarly explicit was a conclusion of the February 14 report of an independent investigation of Sudan by John Harker under the auspices of the Canadian government: "It is difficult to imagine a cease-fire while oil extraction continues, and almost impossible to do so if revenues keep flowing to the GNPOC partners and the GOS as currently arranged."

A report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Sudan last October comes to the same conclusion: "The oil issue and the extremely volatile situation prevailing in western Upper Nile are clearly at the core of the armed conflict in the Sudan and have particularly dire consequences for peace."

While the oil pipeline is mentioned in the report, its paramount significance to the deteriorating human rights situation is lost. In light of the new oil revenues, the report's assessment that "[a]s in 1998, neither side appears to have the ability to win the war militarily," and references to Sudan's "moribund" economy are woefully

outdated.

This concludes my joint statement on behalf of the U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom and Freedom House....